



Press Release Contact Information:

Robin Nickel
WIDS
associate director
1 Foundation Circle
Waunakee, WI
USA, 53597
Voice: 608-849-2411
E-Mail: [Email us Here](#)
Website: [Visit Our Website](#)

Strengthening Assessment and Measurement at PTI

At Pittsburgh Technical Institute (PTI), assessment drives curriculum development and classroom teaching. It also helps the college measure - on a program level - whether or not students truly master required competencies, and if not, where curriculum revisions are necessary.

WAUNAKEE, WI, October 15, 2008 **/24-7PressRelease/** -- At Pittsburgh Technical Institute (PTI), assessment drives curriculum development and classroom teaching. It also helps the college measure - on a program level - whether or not students truly master required competencies, and if not, where curriculum revisions are necessary.

But it wasn't until recently that PTI reexamined assessment college-wide. That initiative followed the college's introduction to the Worldwide Instructional Design System (WIDS) in 2005. WIDS is a nonprofit organization that provides competency-based curriculum design software and training to educational institutions across North America.

"We were looking for a database to use for curriculum and were impressed with how WIDS was geared to performance-based learning," says General Education Instructor Nancy Feather.

"We used WIDS as a best practices model to validate performance-based learning," adds Roxianne Snodgrass, assessment coordinator.

Faculty assessment fair

The close examination of college assessments soon followed. To glean faculty buy-in of WIDS as PTI's curriculum development tool, and of the assessment initiative, PTI launched the "Think About It" Assessment Fair. The Fair - held during a faculty in-service day - fueled instructors to brainstorm how to create innovative performance-based assessments to help students succeed in the workplace. Simultaneously, PTI's WIDS curriculum coordinators, comprised of PTI faculty from each major program area who specialize in curriculum design, introduced instructors to WIDS and the Software's Performance Assessment Task Library. The library allows users to access hundreds of possible performance assessment tasks - from biographies and critiques to board games and data analysis.

"At the Assessment Fair, we looked at different performance-based assessments using the WIDS library," says Feather. The instructors were divided during the fair into different disciplines, where they heard presentations from colleagues on unique ways of assessing competencies already in place at PTI.

The college-wide endeavor helped instructors determine the characteristics of quality assessment and explore the reasons why students are assessed. It also provided an opportunity for them to brainstorm about how to create innovative performance-based assessments.

Instructors concurred that good assessment measures skills necessary to succeed in the workplace; provides accurate feedback on a student's performance level; addresses as many learning styles as possible; incorporates concepts previously demonstrated through learning activities; and provides consistent grading criteria.

New syllabi with master competencies linked to assessment

Armed with WIDS as a tool, and with a universal understanding of assessment, instructors then gathered within their departments with all course syllabi and printed copies of the WIDS verb and performance assessment task libraries. The libraries are part of WIDS Software and help curriculum developers to include proper competency verbiage and effective performance assessment tasks for courses.

"In the afternoon, we looked at revising master competencies," says Feather. Together, faculty determined master competencies for every course college-wide. "This naturally led to discussions about linking competencies to assessments," says Feather.

As a result, the WIDS coordinators in each department began developing new syllabi showing the connection between master competencies and performance assessments.

Today, a curriculum process is in place at PTI that not only has instructors thinking of how to best connect master course competencies with performance assessment tasks, it has them working to measure student performance, knowledge and skills.

Measurement of assessment internally and externally

To show evidence that the students in a particular program had mastered competencies, PTI devised a Student Learning Outcomes (SLO) Matrix showing where master competencies aligned with performance assessments. The quarterly SLO Matrix course evaluations have instructors document the success of each assessment. The information is documented on a spreadsheet and lists master competencies, types of assessments, performance standards and outcomes. "The teachers do the analysis of how things went in the classroom," says Snodgrass. From there, department heads review the course evaluations for a more program-focused snapshot of how students are learning.

The ultimate goal, according to Snodgrass, is to improve student learning. "This plays into curriculum revision," she says. "We now have a curriculum development process in place where the department chair gets a report. It is a good system and we are moving forward with it ..." She notes that when instructors and department heads see gaps in student mastery of competencies and curriculum, courses or programs are revised in an effort to make the course/program more effective.

And, while it is a benefit to measure assessments internally, it is also important to measure them externally; but more difficult. Nonetheless, PTI is working toward using WIDS to help advisory board members and employers assess student performance, as well. "We are really trying to take a global look at everything we do with students," she says. Surveys have been developed using master competencies to discover how employees (graduates of PTI) perform in the eyes of their employers, and similarly, how interns (students of PTI) perform.

"What WIDS did was help us focus on competencies, core abilities, assessment and program outcomes," says Snodgrass. "From this, everything flows."

To learn more about PTI's techniques, contact Snodgrass at Snodgrass.roxianne@pit.edu. To find out more about WIDS visit www.wids.org.

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